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Handwriting Woes!

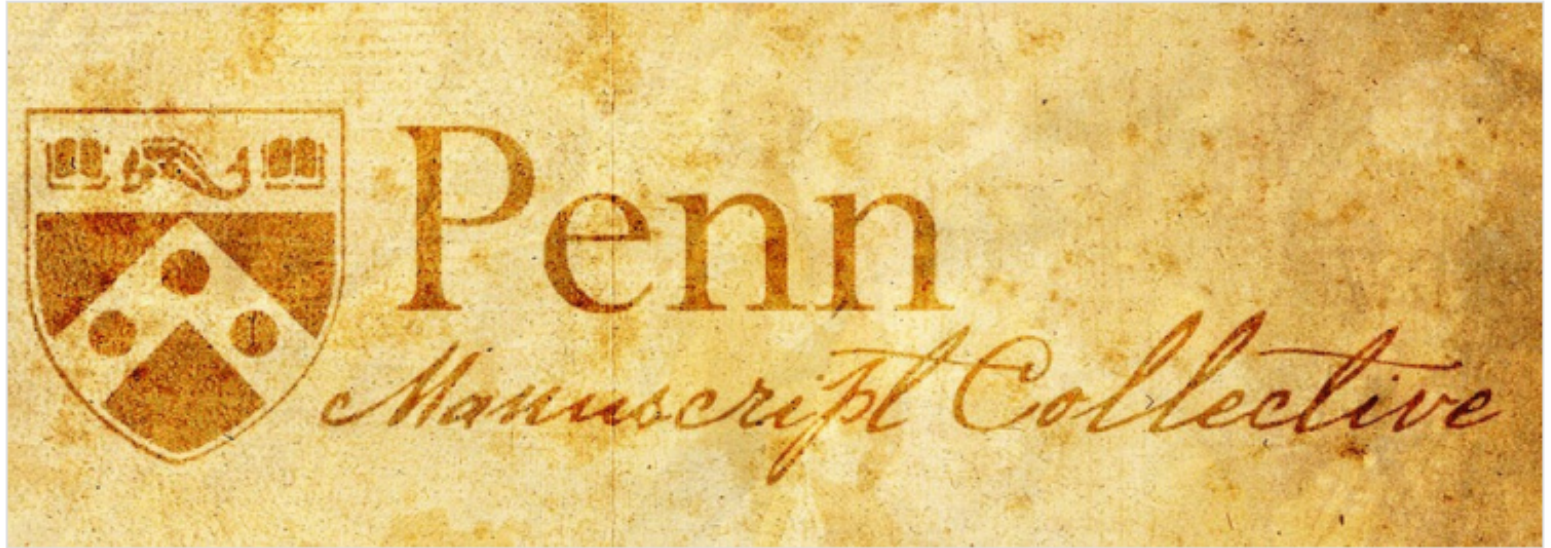
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25 Sunday Aug
2013

Handwriting Woes!

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POSTED BY JOHN BARANIK IN SUMMER 2013

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In the middle of a relaxing day of vacation, I opened my inbox to an email from [Professor Stallybrass](#). He was writing about handwriting—Benjamin Franklin’s handwriting. In the 1930s, [Penn](#) acquired what was believed to be the extant manuscript of [Benjamin Franklin](#), entitled “Elegy on My Sister Franklin.” The Library [Chronicle announced](#) this acquisition as “one of the most important events in the recent history of the Library.” [Carl Van Doren](#), writer and winner of the 1938 [Pulitzer prize-winning biography Benjamin Franklin](#), was the first writer to include the “Elegy” in any Franklin biography. In a widely printed [newspaper article](#) by [Elmo Scott Watson](#), Van Doren remarked

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[the Elegy] was only recently discovered...The precise date of the elegy is still uncertain, as is the name of the sister-in-law whose death called forth...These are perhaps the earliest surviving words of Franklin, written when he had not yet finally decided between poetry and prose.

This newspaper article (and the Library Chronicle article) describe Elegy in terms that suggest that the author of the manuscript is undoubtedly written by Franklin: “the fact is that his writing career started with a poem!” Indeed, the Library Chronicle calls the manuscript of the Elegy a “unique treasure.”

Warm from my Breast surcharg'd with Grief & Woe
These melancholy Strains spontaneous flow
Flow from a fairer Sister's sad Decree
Flow from the worthiest of the female Race...

Who o'er all Flesh maintains a sovereign Sway
And Millions fall his Victim every Day
Not Worth, Wit, Beauty, Wealth or Power can free
From rigid Fate's immutable Decree...

My dear my much-loved Sister!—O my Friend
We in this World on nothing may depend
For soon as we esteem ourselves possess
Of every needful Thing to make us blest
Some Friend's Denial (like here we now lament)
Casual Mischance, or Tragical Event
Like an intruding Guest will intervene
Frustrate our Hopes and mar our blissful Scene.
How weak! how vain! How void all mundane joys
A medley fraught with Nonsense, Show and Noise
O what is Life which we so high esteem
A Bubble, Vapour, Shadow, Fleeting Dream
From which that we sprang & surely must
Or soon or late return to native Dust
What mortal Man even in his best Estate
All Vanity, Pride, Folly and Deceit...

Else might this worthy Saint whose wayward race
We now deplore have claimed a longer Date
Of circling Years her Kin to serve and bless
Enjoy her Friends and Life's good Things possess...
And tho' I humbly trust our Friend deceased
Is waited to the Saints eternal Rest
Yet her sad Fate mangle my Resolves
In Woe's profound Abyss my soul involves
With Sighs and Groans my lab'ring Bosom swells
And down my cheeks Grief's mournful Streams impels
May Heaven forgive me if I ought offend
Whilst thus I mourn my dear departed Friend
Sure Heaven forbids not for our Friends to mourn
Nor to bedew with Tears their peaceful Un

— The text of "Elegy on My Sister Franklin"

The only facts in question seem to be the date of the manuscript—the writer of the Library Chronicle writes that it most likely was written soon after 1718. This dates to about the time that Franklin was apprenticed to his brother [James](#) in Boston and began to become interested in poetry, composing a number of "little pieces." James, a printer, saw the value in having fresh literature to print and encouraged young Benjamin to compose. One such ballad, [The Lighthouse Tragedy](#), was written about a recent drowning of a [Captain Worthilake](#) and his daughters. It "sold wonderfully, the event being recent," wrote Franklin, admitting that "this flattered my vanity." Franklin's [father](#), however, intervened, criticizing Franklin's poetry and reminding him that "verse-makers were generally [beggars](#)."

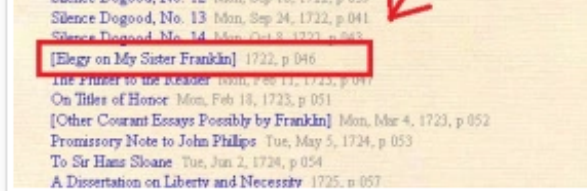
Four years later, in a [June issue](#) of the [New England Courant](#), there appeared "A RECEIPT to make a New England Funeral ELEGY," written by Franklin's now famous pseudonym, [Silence Dogood](#). These instructions call for the creation of cloying expressions of grief and overly simple or cliché rhymes, directions which seem to suggest a sixteen-year-old Franklin looking back with disdain upon his younger poetry. The Library Chronicle reads:

There can be little doubt, we think, that the "Elegy on My Sister Franklin" was written in 1718 or shortly after, in the period when the ambitious young printer's apprentice, with vanity flattered by the success of "The Lighthouse tragedy" and other ballads, had not yet perceived the probability of his becoming but "a very bad poet."

Little doubt. But over eighty years later, when browsing the [Franklin Papers](#), the Elegy appears in brackets—it has been dis-attributed to Franklin.

Volume 1 January 6, 1706, through December 31, 1734

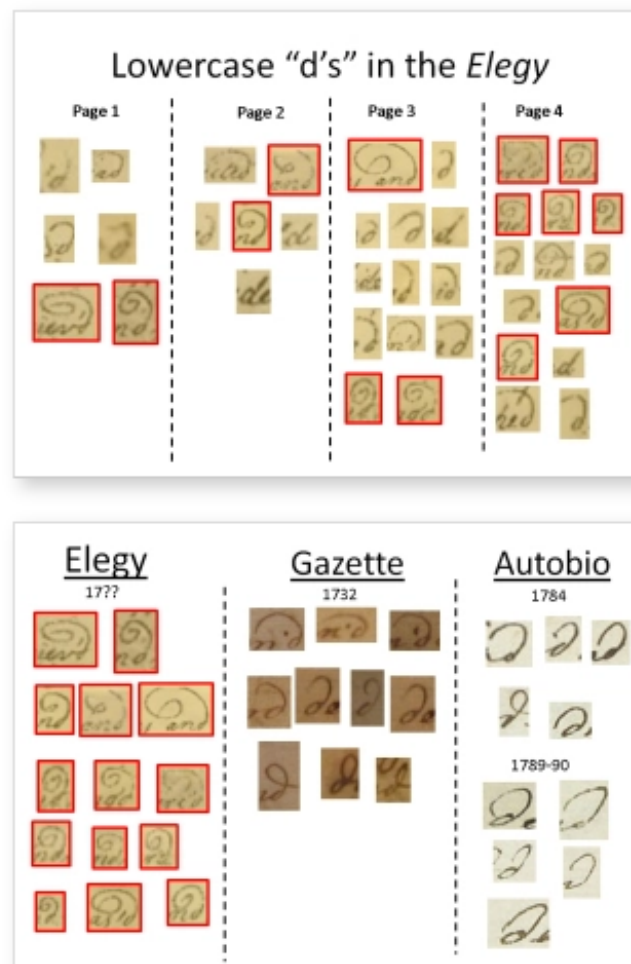
Record of Birth Sun, Jan 6, 1706, p 003
Record of Baptism Sun, Jan 6, 1706, p 003
Verses from Benjamin Franklin (the Elder) Fri, Jul 7, 1710, p 003
Acrostic from Benjamin Franklin (the Elder) Sat, Jul 15, 1710, p 004
Verses from Benjamin Franklin (the Elder) 1713, p 005
The Lighthouse Tragedy Mon, Nov 3, 1718, p 006
The Taking of Teach the Pirate March 1719, p 007
Silence Dogood, No. 1 Mon, Apr 2, 1722, p 008
Silence Dogood, No. 2 Mon, Apr 16, 1722, p 011
Silence Dogood, No. 3 Mon, Apr 30, 1722, p 013
Silence Dogood, No. 4 Mon, May 14, 1722, p 014
Silence Dogood, No. 5 Mon, May 28, 1722, p 018
Silence Dogood, No. 6 Mon, Jun 11, 1722, p 021
Silence Dogood, No. 7 Mon, Jun 25, 1722, p 023
Silence Dogood, No. 8 Mon, Jul 9, 1722, p 027
Silence Dogood, No. 9 Mon, Jul 23, 1722, p 030
Silence Dogood, No. 10 Mon, Aug 13, 1722, p 032
Silence Dogood, No. 11 Mon, Aug 20, 1722, p 037
Silence Dogood, No. 12 Mon, Sep 10, 1722, p 039



- The Elegy has been disattributed in the Franklin Papers

How can we know if this was the work of Franklin or not? I set to work to try to answer this question, building a new alphabet table from Franklin's Elegy. I also used images from 1732 of Franklin's handwriting when he was drafting an article for the [Pennsylvania Gazette](#).

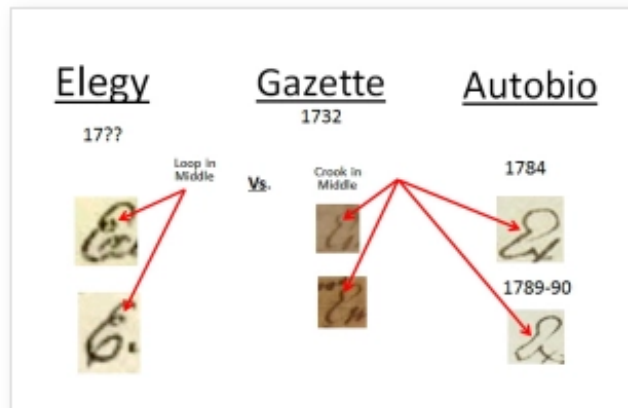
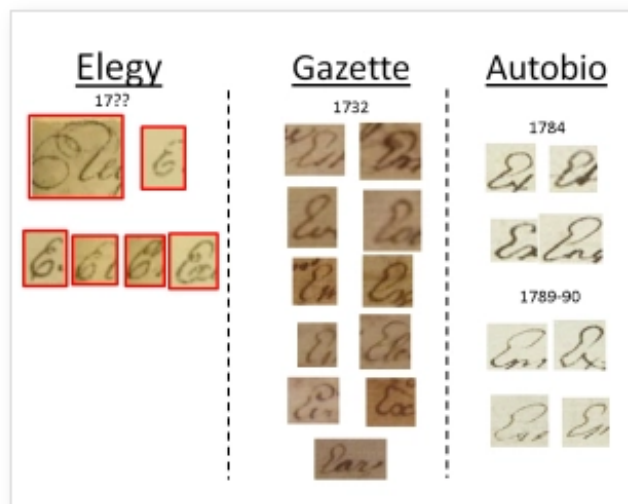
Results? Inconclusive. I have, however, found some interesting patterns in the handwriting in the Elegy. Many, lowercase "d's," for example, have ascenders that become spirals. Even without sampling every single lowercase "d" in the Elegy, I found them to occur often.



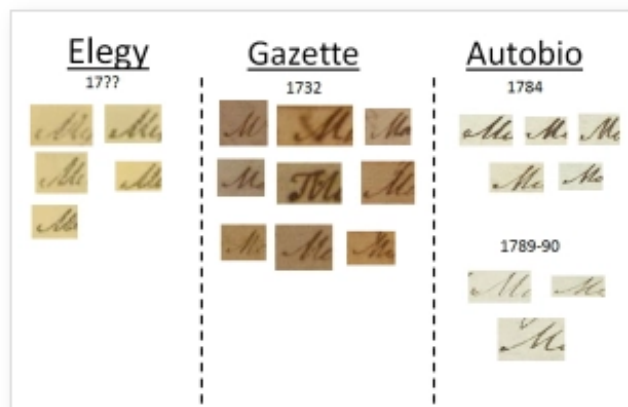
As seen in the images above, I have not found this shape to occur anywhere else in Franklin's handwriting.

Likewise, capital "E's" in the Elegy were more elaborate, featuring a loop instead of a crook in their middles, a shape that I have not found in any other Franklin handwriting.

handwriting.



The capital "M's" are very consistent across the Elegy, Gazette, and Autobiography.

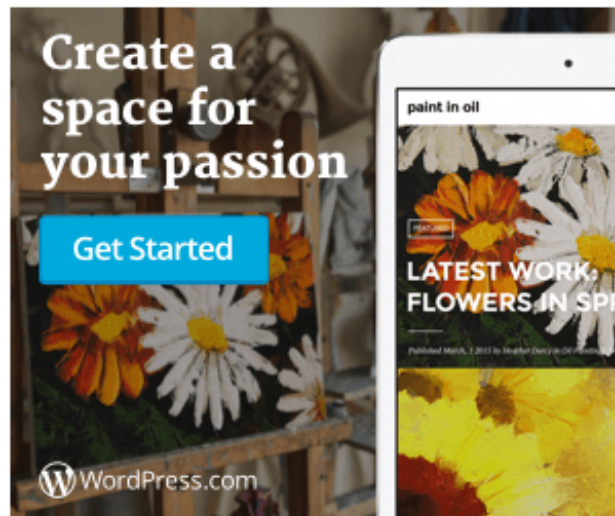


Given these mixed results (and dozens of other similar image comparisons), the jury is still out as to whether the Elegy is Franklin's hand or not. If his handwriting mirrored his style of poetry at this time, perhaps the elaborate script in the Elegy is his...but MUCH work still remains to be done. In the meantime, I'll continue to compile and compare images of different documents from Franklin's life. Image scanning and editing is going well for the John Rowe Parker Correspondence! So far about 250 images have been scanned and edited. While scanning is time consuming, the 600dpi resolution is incredible! I look forward to using close-ups from these huge image files.

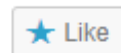
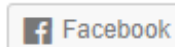


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